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## Paul Ibell: Tennessee Williams

Verna Foster

Loyola University Chicago, [vfoster@luc.edu](mailto:vfoster@luc.edu)

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**Tennessee Williams**, by Paul Ibell, London, Reaktion Books, 2016, 192 pp., 32 illus., £11.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9781780236629

Paul Ibell's *Tennessee Williams* is published in the series Critical Lives, which is designed to explore the lives of important cultural figures in relation to their major works. The assumed audience of Ibell's book is the general public, specifically the British general public, given some of the information that Ibell provides, and perhaps high school students and undergraduates rather than scholars. There are no citations or index and only a brief bibliography. Within its limited purview, however, *Tennessee Williams* succeeds admirably in fulfilling its mandate. Ibell offers a clear and coherent account of Williams's life and its influence on his major works, and more interestingly, on some of his less well-known plays as well.

Williams is, along with Strindberg, one of the most overtly autobiographical of playwrights; consequently the autobiographical elements in his plays have received much attention. Ibell succinctly presents this material, beginning with the early years, proceeding through a decade-by-decade account of Williams's life and work from the 1940s to the 1980s, and concluding with a chapter on his posthumous reputation. Here we find the familiar story of Williams's fraught relationship with his parents (especially his mother, Edwina), his sexual adventures and his more permanent lovers and partners, his love of Italy, his drinking and drugs. Structuring the biography is the usual narrative arc of Williams's rise to fame, culminating in the Chicago production of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944, followed by the brilliant years in which he wrote his masterpieces from *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) to *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1963), succeeded in turn by the years of personal decline and artistic experimentation that produced such works as *The Mutilated* and *the Gnädiges Fräulein* (1966),

*In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969), *Vieux Carré* (1977), and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981), plays that were misunderstood and cruelly reviewed by theatre critics.

Ibell provides clear, concise, and sometimes detailed information on the early plays, though his discussion of the major plays is selective. There is not much on *The Rose Tattoo* or *Camino Real*. Nor is there any significant account of Williams's use of expressionist aural and visual techniques. In accordance with the requirements of the series for which he is writing, Ibell does spell out the autobiographical elements in the plays, especially the pervasive influence of Williams's dysfunctional family and, in particular, his psychologically disturbed sister, Rose, for whose lobotomy Williams felt personally responsible. Ibell cites Rose's influence on such characters as Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, Blanche in *Streetcar*, and Zelda Fitzgerald in *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980). But it is surely an exaggeration to say that there is a character named Rose in 'almost every one' of Williams's plays (25), *The Rose Tattoo* notwithstanding. More interestingly, Ibell suggests that Blanche's reliance on 'the kindness of strangers' is an indictment of her own, and Williams's, family (58). He discusses too the presence of Williams's lovers in his plays, ranging from the 'mercurial', crockery-smashing Pancho Rodriguez y Gonzalez in his depiction of Stanley Kowalski (51-52) to his portrait of his 'first gay relationship', with Kip Kiernan, in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, a play that also depicts Williams himself as August and his later partner, Frank Merlo (155).

The most innovative part of Ibell's book, and most informative for students of Tennessee Williams, is his discussion of Williams's late plays, some of which are rarely ever mentioned in the critical literature. One such play, for example, is *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens*, which suggests, Ibell says, that for gay men 'any attempt to have a relationship with a macho straight man is doomed' (125). Contributing to the recent critical rehabilitation of the late

plays, Ibell offers staunch defenses of *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, *Something Cloudy*, *Something Clear*, and, especially interesting, *A House Not Built to Stand* (1982), whose ‘comic force’ and ‘black comedy’ Ibell calls ‘Ortonesque’ (163). This work, too, his last play, channels Williams’s own family.

In discussing Williams’s popularity in England, Ibell suggests that part of his appeal lies in his plays’ ‘nostalgia’ for the past. But his nostalgia has a ‘New World twist’ (18). To make this point, Ibell curiously contrasts Williams’s concern for the fall of individuals from aristocratic grace with Evelyn Waugh’s obsession with the grandeur of aristocracy itself. Throughout the book, in fact, Ibell frequently digresses to make such odd comparisons, sometimes briefly, sometimes at greater length. Williams’s writing poems on shoeboxes while he worked in a shoe warehouse in St. Louis (an episode that famously finds its way into *The Glass Menagerie*) evokes ‘shades of the young Joe Orton defacing Islington library books’ (23), while the dramatist’s fear of descending, like Rose, into madness elicits a comparison with King Lear (27). A more extended digression concerns John Gielgud’s obsession with theatre at the expense of everything else. Buying a newspaper in September 1939, Gielgud was devastated that Gladys Cooper had received bad reviews but had no idea or concern whether or not war had been declared (37-38). The point is to illuminate Williams’s own priorities in regard to war and theatre, but the anecdote, while fascinating, seems oddly irrelevant. Discussing Williams’s dissatisfaction during his time in Hollywood, Ibell offers an apparently unnecessary comparison with Ivor Novello, including the bizarre fact that Novello co-wrote the dialogue for the film *Tarzan the Ape Man* (41). These digressive comparisons, irritating at first, like an intellectual tic, become after a while one of the book’s pleasures.

Minor cavils: the Chekhovian cherry orchard is owned by Ranevskaya, not Arcadina (9); much more than the first scene of Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine* is based on *Streetcar* (59). More seriously, though Ibell mentions that the humor in Williams's work is often overlooked (154), he does little to redress the balance. Finally, a nice feature of Ibell's book is the inclusion of some of Williams's poems.

Verna A. Foster

*Loyola University Chicago*

*vfoster@luc.edu*